

Winter Concert



Tannhäuser Overture
Wagner

Piano Concerto No. 2
Saint-Saëns

Swan Lake Suite
Tchaikovsky

Irvine Auditorium
Dec 14th, 2019

Concert Program

Wagner *Tannhäuser Overture*

Saint-Saëns *Piano Concerto No. 2 – soloist Minh Nguyen*

- I. Andante sostenuto
- II. Allegro scherzando
- III. Presto

— INTERMISSION —

Tchaikovsky *Swan Lake Suite*

- I. Scène
- II. Valse
- III. Danse des Cygnes/Dance of the Swans
- IV. Scène
- V. Danse Hongroise (Hungarian Dance)
- VI. Scène

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many people and organizations who have made this concert possible, and who have continued to support our orchestra: Dr. Martin Heyworth (Faculty Advisor), Dr. Michael Ketner (Director of Performance, Penn Music Department), Anna Delaney (Chief Administrative Officer, Perelman School of Medicine), Jon McCabe, GAPSAs, BGSA, MSG, SASGOV, Penn Dental, and the Graduate School of Engineering. We would also like to thank the sectional coaches Maya Jacobs, Hanul Park and Nozomi Imamura.

Minh Nguyen - Soloist

Praised by the Santa Monica Mirror and Hollywood Today for playing with "true passion and poise", Minh Nguyen continues to share his musical passion with others through piano, organ, and chamber music.

He began piano lessons at age 6 and violin and organ at age 9. Minh was recognized at the early age of 11 when he placed first in the Orange County Chapter of the American Guild of Organists competition. He was 14 when he made his debut at Renee and Henry Segerstrom Hall with the Orange County Youth Symphony Orchestra, performing Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. In the following year, he received second prize in the biennial American Guild of Organists Regional Competition for Young Organists of Region IX in Phoenix, Arizona.

He soloed with the UCLA Philharmonia and the Santa Monica Symphony, performing Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto and Liszt's First Piano Concerto as part of their 2012-2013 orchestral season. Minh continued to compete extensively and was the finalist in the Wideman International Piano Competition in 2013, held in Shreveport, Louisiana. He received the Frederick Swann Award for first prize in the National Rodgers Organ Competition held in Phoenix, Arizona in 2015 and received the opportunity to tour with Rodgers as part of their *Emerging Artists* concert series.

Minh has been invited to perform all around the world, including Royce Hall, Walt Disney Concert Hall, and Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica of Saigon in Vietnam, and the Taipei Performing Arts Center in Taiwan. From his travels, he had the opportunity to meet and perform in



master classes of distinguished organists Christopher Young, Todd Wilson, and Sophie-Véronique Cauchefier-Choplin as well as distinguished pianists Malcolm Bilson, Byron Janis, who studied under Vladimir Horowitz, Jura Margulis, son of renowned pianist Vitaly Margulis, and Ilana Vered, student of famed Julliard pedagogue Rosina Lhevinne.

Minh graduated from UCLA with a Bachelor of Arts in Music with dual concentrations in piano and organ performance. He served as organist at Holy Family Cathedral in the Catholic Diocese of Orange, CA for 9 years before moving to Philadelphia. He also served as an organist for the Hour of Power Choir, directed by world-renowned Donald Neuen at Shepherd's Grove Church as part of *Hour of Power with Bobby Schuller*, an internationally broadcasted television service that airs weekly on TBN. He was the cofounder and orchestral director of the Game Music Ensemble, a student-run symphony orchestra at UCLA that specializes in the performance of works and soundtracks in video games and film. Currently, Minh is pursuing dentistry as his professional career and is a dental student at the University of Pennsylvania.

The Music

Overture: Tannhäuser (1845 version)

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Because his career extended into the last quarter of the 19th century, it may be tempting to consider Wagner as belonging to a younger generation than the 'Class of 1809/10', the cohort of relatively short-lived composers who were born at the end of that century's first decade (Felix Mendelssohn, Fryderyk Chopin, and Robert Schumann). In fact, Wagner was only 3 or 4 years younger than this group of important composers, and had already completed the first version of *Tannhäuser*, the fifth of his 13 operas, within their lifetimes. This initial version of *Tannhäuser* was completed in 1845, and was first performed during that year at the opera house in Dresden, where Wagner was employed as the second *Kapellmeister* (deputy music director). The Italianate city of Dresden in eastern Germany had a distinguished musical history, counting the major composers Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) and Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783) among its previous *Kapellmeister*.

Teutonic myth provided, as was characteristic for Wagner, the subject-matter of *Tannhäuser*. Following his typical *modus operandi*, Wagner also wrote the libretto of this opera. The action of this 3-act opera is set in the early 13th century, at the time of the Crusades (the quixotic and ultimately unsuccessful campaign to promote Christianity in the Middle East). Tannhäuser is one of several knights-minstrels in the opera. The core of the story is Tannhäuser's struggle between hedonism and virtue. These seemingly polar opposites are, respectively, personified by two female characters, Venus and Elisabeth. At the start of Act 1, Tannhäuser is visiting a grotto inhabited by Venus, beneath a mountain (the Venusberg). In Act 2, Tannhäuser participates in a singing contest, during which his prior association with Venus is implied or stated. This association is regarded, by other individuals present at the contest, as inappropriate, with the result that Tannhäuser is forced to visit Rome, seeking absolution from the Pope. Such absolution is not forthcoming, and Tannhäuser returns to Germany during Act 3. With the intercession of the saintly Elisabeth, who dies before the end of the opera, the soul of the imminently-expiring Tannhäuser is 'redeemed'.

The overture starts with a solemn 'processional' idea on clarinets, bassoons, and horns, which is thematically related to a chorus of pilgrims (returning from Rome) in Act 3 of the opera. The slow initial section of the overture is followed by fast music that portrays the sensually-charged atmosphere in the Venusberg grotto. Later, a confident, 'striding' theme appears; this is based on a song that Tannhäuser had sung in the presence of Venus, and had revisited during the singing contest, scandalizing a number of straitlaced participants and observers at that event.

During the 30 years following 1845, Wagner revised *Tannhäuser* several times. An 1861 production in Paris was disrupted by members of a 'Jockey Club', blowing dog whistles, as an act of defiance against an unpopular member of the aristocracy (Princess Pauline Metternich), who had spearheaded an invitation for Wagner to stage the opera. A later production of *Tannhäuser* in Wagner's lifetime occurred in Vienna (in 1875).

Piano Concerto No. 2, in G minor, Op. 22

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

1. **Andante sostenuto**
2. **Allegro scherzando**
3. **Presto**

A prolific and long-lived composer, Saint-Saëns was born during the lifetime of Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) and lived for three years beyond the end of the First World War, by which time the career of Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) was well advanced. Throughout his career, Saint-Saëns embraced ‘traditional’ tonality and largely avoided the exploratory approach to harmony pursued by his much younger contemporary, Claude Debussy (1862-1918), whom he outlived by three years. During much of the 20th century, Saint-Saëns’s apparent conservatism was at odds with the supposedly progressive styles of the time (atonality and serialism). Almost a century after his lifetime, however, with the failure of such styles to gain significant traction among musically literate audiences, Saint-Saëns’s adherence to a tonal musical language seems prescient rather than passé.

A virtuoso pianist, Saint-Saëns wrote five piano concertos. The second, which dates from 1868, begins with the soloist playing slow interlocking phrases in G minor, in a contrapuntal manner recalling J. S. Bach. Massive orchestral chords follow, suggesting a grand operatic spectacle. Later, there is a ‘yearning’ theme introduced by the solo piano, which leads to peremptory exchanges between the piano and the orchestra, and a faster section in which octaves on the piano, in both hands non-synchronously, surge up and down the keyboard. Following a cadenza for the soloist, the contrapuntal idea from the start of the work returns. The first movement concludes with a reprise of the massive orchestral chords, punctuated by rising arpeggios on the piano.

In the rest of the concerto, the atmosphere is somewhat lightened - a situation that prompted one observer to remark that the work “begins with Bach and ends with Offenbach”. The piano part, however, remains technically challenging. Saint-Saëns’s subtle and expert orchestral technique is exemplified at the start of the ‘light-fingered’ second movement, where tonic (E flat) and dominant (B flat) notes are played softly on two timpani. Immediately attractive melodic ideas are a feature of this movement, as is

pellucid orchestration with a transparency redolent of chamber music. The finale returns to the G minor tonality of the first movement, beginning with churning triplets on the piano alone and then in the orchestra. This energetic movement includes extensive use of trills in the piano part.

Among Saint-Saëns's other piano concertos, the fifth, dating from 1896, is especially compelling. This F major work (known as the *Egyptian* concerto) was written in Cairo and has a piano part that is a major challenge to a performer. A fine performance of this work, by Jean-Ives Thibaudet and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by Andris Nelsons, is available on YouTube. In the second movement of the fifth piano concerto, there are two harmonically remarkable passages in which the piano sounds as though it has been mechanically altered ('prepared'). In fact, the extraordinary sound is achieved by imaginative spacing of chords on an unmodified instrument. During the same movement, there is an evocation of East Asian music, which may be a legacy of a trip to Indochina (Vietnam) made by Saint-Saëns in 1895.

Much of Saint-Saëns's creative energy was directed towards writing operas. Of his 13 works in this genre (one of them a 'completion' of an opera by his contemporary Ernest Guiraud), the only one that is staged with at least moderate frequency is *Samson et Dalila*. Indeed, Saint-Saëns is one of several front-rank composers whose reputation with the 'public' is not primarily based on their substantial operatic output - this distinguished cohort includes Joseph Haydn, Dvořák, and the short-lived Franz Schubert. As documented in *Saint-Saëns and the Stage*, by Hugh Macdonald (Cambridge University Press, 2019), there were few productions of Saint-Saëns's 'non-*Samson*' operas during the (approximate) century following his death, although a modest increase in performances and recordings of these works now appears to be occurring.

Swan Lake Suite, Op. 20a (Version A)

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

1. Scène
2. Valse
3. Danse des Cygnes/Dance of the Swans
4. Scène
5. Danse Hongroise (Hungarian Dance)
6. Scène

While working on the score of *Swan Lake* in 1875, Tchaikovsky wrote to the composer Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov, stating that he took on the commission to write this ballet “partly for the money, which I need, and partly because I have long wanted to try my hand at this kind of music” (i.e., ballet). *Swan Lake* is the first of Tchaikovsky’s three major ballets; the other two, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, followed in 1888-9 and 1891-2, respectively. *Swan Lake* was commissioned by the management of the Bolshoy Theatre in Moscow, although the details of the commission are unclear. The originator of the broadly Germanic story of the ballet - which involves a prince (Siegfried), a ‘swan-princess’ (Odette), ‘swan-maidens’, and an evil magician (Rothbart) and his daughter (confusingly called Odile), appears not to have been identified.

Although Tchaikovsky is an enduringly prominent and popular composer, obtaining accurate information about Tchaikovsky and the genesis of his works is challenging for readers who do not understand Russian. Furthermore, Soviet-era literature about Tchaikovsky is not necessarily reliable, and may contain deliberate distortions about, for example, the composer’s personal life, whether sanitized or sensationalized. During the 20th century, a multi-volume edition of Tchaikovsky’s works appeared in the former Soviet Union. The orchestral score of the *Swan Lake* ballet occupies two volumes in this edition. Comprising 798 pages of music, these two volumes were published in 1957. Performance time of the whole ballet is approximately 2.5 hours. Composition of the substantial 4-act ballet score (which is written for a large orchestra) appears to have proceeded relatively smoothly, between August 1875 and April 1876. The ballet was first performed in February 1877, in Moscow, receiving a total of 41 performances between then and 1883. At least some of these performances were notable for the use of electric lighting, an innovation at that time. No complete performances of *Swan Lake* appear to have occurred during the rest of Tchaikovsky’s life (although Act 2 was performed in Prague in 1888).

Starting in 1895, some 15 months after Tchaikovsky’s death from cholera at the age of 53, a new production of *Swan Lake* in St. Petersburg initiated a performance tradition that established the ballet as a major classic. At least some performances from the 1890s and later appear to have used ‘edited’ musical scores that deviated, to a greater or lesser extent, from Tchaikovsky’s intentions. In 1882, Tchaikovsky wrote to the publisher of his works, Pyotr

Jurgenson, proposing to extract sections of the ballet score to generate an orchestral suite for concert performance. There is no evidence, however, that Tchaikovsky assembled the *Swan Lake* suite now known as version A (in six movements), which Jurgenson published in 1900, although the music in the suite corresponds closely to that in the pertinent sections of the Russian 1957 complete ballet score (apart from a 7-bar addition of unknown authorship at the end of the fourth movement of the suite).

The opening movement of the suite is taken from Act 2 of the ballet, and includes plaintive oboe solos, string tremolos, a prominent harp part, and rapidly repeated chords on woodwind instruments. This is followed by a waltz that occurs during a party celebrating Siegfried's 'coming of age' in Act 1 of the ballet. The next section of the suite is a short dance for the swans from Act 2, in which solo woodwind writing is prominent - as exemplified by a piquant trio for oboes and bassoon at the start of this section. The fourth section of the suite, also from Act 2 of the ballet, includes a solo harp cadenza, as well as an extensive part for a solo violin, repeated woodwind chords, and, in its closing pages, a part for solo cello in a duet with the solo violin, with discreet contributions by other instruments. To the present observer, the Hungarian dance that follows (imported from Act 3 of the ballet) sounds at least as much Russian as Hungarian. In any event, Hungarian elements in this movement belong to the 19th century urban 'Hungarian' manner cultivated by, for example, Brahms and Liszt, and do not reflect the authentic folk music of the Hungarian countryside, such as that recorded and transcribed by Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók in the first two decades of the 20th century. The final section of the suite corresponds to a scene at the end of the ballet during which Odette and Siegfried are engulfed by the Lake of the Swans, which has overflowed as a result of a storm (the music includes a depiction of a thunderstorm). At the conclusion of the ballet, swans are seen swimming on the now tranquil lake.

The first known performance of the *Swan Lake* suite (version A) was in London, in September 1901, conducted by Henry Wood (originator of the London Promenade concerts). 'Version B' of the *Swan Lake* suite was published in the 1950s; it comprises eight movements, five of which are identical to ones in version A of the suite, and three others that are imported from Act 3 of the ballet.

(Martin F. Heyworth, MD)

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